

# **AAPI Women in Politics Report**

**Massachusetts Focus - 2021**



The Commonwealth of Massachusetts  
Asian American Commission



The Commonwealth of Massachusetts Asian American Commission (AAC) is committed to advocating for the Asian American and Pacific Islander community throughout Massachusetts. To learn more, visit the AAC website at [www.aacommission.org](http://www.aacommission.org).

## Why AAPI Women Representation Matters<sup>1</sup>

Although the Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) community is the fastest growing demographic in the United States, AAPI individuals—and AAPI women in particular—remain vastly underrepresented in elected offices across the country. This disparity matters. When AAPI women’s voices are more proportionately represented at policymaking tables, they give visibility to the needs of underserved communities and help ensure that federal, state, and local policies are more responsive to diverse constituencies. In short, increasing AAPI women’s political representation leads to a more inclusive, robust, and effective democracy.



Left to right:

Rep. Erika Uytterhoeven (House)

Rep. Maria Duaime Robinson (House)

Rep. Vanna Howard (House)

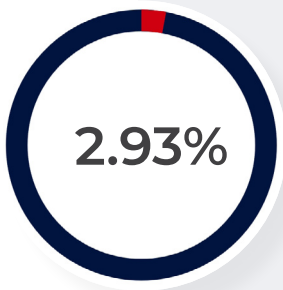
Rep. Tram T. Nguyen (House)

Rep. Sonia Chang-Diaz (Senate)

While AAPI women representation has hit a record high in several legislative bodies this year, numerous barriers and gaps persist. This report explores many of these realities and calls for greater gender and racial equality among the elected leaders who represent diverse communities across the United States.<sup>2</sup>

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## AAPI Women in Elected Office (Massachusetts)<sup>3</sup>



### 67 of the 2,288 women

state legislators serving across the U.S. identify as AAPI or multiracial AAPI. AAPI women serve as state legislators in 22 states.<sup>4</sup>

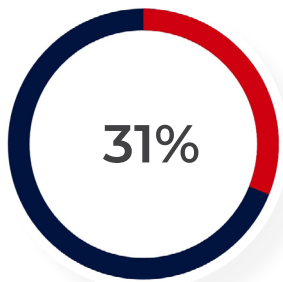
## Current and Historical Realities



In 2009, Sonia Chang-Diaz became the **first** person/woman of Asian descent elected to the Massachusetts State Legislature.



As of 2021, there are currently **five women of Asian descent** serving in the MA State Legislature with ancestry that can be traced back to Cambodia, China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam.



As of 2021, **31%** of all MA state legislators identify as women.

## AAPI Women in Elected Office (Massachusetts)

### Barriers and Progress

#### BARRIERS

Presently, there are no **Pacific Islander** women serving in elected office at the state level in MA.

“AAPI women run up against the **same barriers** that other women experience in running for office, such as having lower incomes, limited access to childcare, little flexibility in taking time out from a job to run for office. AAPI women have our **own unique struggles** in advancing ourselves as strong candidates, particularly as we are “typed” as submissive, or perceived as the perpetual foreigner.”

- MA State Representative Tram Nguyen; first Vietnamese American woman in elected office in Massachusetts



#### PROGRESS

As of 2010, there had not been a single Asian American serving in the MA House. Eleven years later, Asian American representation in the MA Legislature has hit a **record high** of eight seats in the House and one seat in the Senate.<sup>5</sup>



“We need more women, including women of color, especially AAPI women, at every level of government. That is to say, there are far too few today, but the trend over the last few years in MA is pointing us in the **right direction**.”

- MA State Representative Vanna Howard; first Khmer woman elected as a state legislator in the United States



“I’m heartened to see that AAPI women representation in **local government** has grown in the past decade. AAPI female politicians have been taking the lead on economic, education transportation, public health issues; these accomplishments will help remove barriers for other AAPI women who want to run for office.”

- Lisa Wong, Town Manager of Winchester, MA; former mayor of Fitchburg, MA; first Asian American woman mayor in MA



“My hope is that AAPI women and all women of color will see themselves **reflected at every level of government** and that our leadership will continue to center the voices of those who are working every day to drive progress.”<sup>6</sup>

- Michelle Wu; Boston City Councilor At-Large and Boston mayoral candidate; first AAPI woman to serve on the Boston City Council

## AAPI Representation: By the Numbers<sup>7</sup>

AAPIs make up **6.1%** of the U.S. population but only **0.9%** of elected leaders in the U.S.

When measuring the percentage of AAPIs in a population against the percentage of elected AAPIs representing that population, studies find that elected AAPIs are proportionately underrepresented at **all levels**, though they have somewhat higher political representation in federal and municipal offices, compared to state legislatures and statewide offices.

While AAPI women lead 81% of state and local AAPI civic engagement organizations, they lag further behind AAPI men when it comes to running for elected office.

**6.1%**

of the U.S. population is AAPI.

**0.9%**

of elected leaders in the U.S. are AAPI.

**19 states**

do not have any AAPI state lawmakers.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

Given the underrepresentation of AAPI women's representation in elected office, it is critical for organizations—both within and outside of the government—to address current barriers and build upon recent progress. Key recommendations include: offering and increasing access to more political training programs that develop pipelines for electing AAPI women, establishing and expanding political giving circles that resource AAPI women with limited fund-raising networks, building out multiracial coalitions that organize across state lines to elect more women of color, encouraging more immigrant AAPI women to run for office, and supporting legislation at the state and local levels that create pathways for more AAPI women in public leadership.

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## Appendix

### Learn More About AAPI Women in Politics (Data as of August 2021)<sup>8</sup>

#### *CURRENT AAPI WOMEN SERVING IN ELECTED OFFICE AT THE FEDERAL LEVEL:*

##### *U.S. House*

- Judy Chu | CA-32
- Pramila Jayapal | WA-07
- Young Kim | CA-39
- Doris Matsui | CA-05
- Grace Meng | NY-06
- Stephanie Murphy | FL-07
- Amata Radewagen | American Samoa (non-voting delegate)
- Michelle Steel | CA-48
- Marilyn Strickland | WA-10

##### *U.S. Senate*

- Mazie Hirono | Hawaii
- Tammy Duckworth | Illinois

#### *CURRENT AAPI WOMEN MAYORS OF MAJOR U.S. CITIES:*

- Karen K. Goh | Bakersfield, CA
- Farrah Khan | Irvine, CA
- Lily Mei | Fremont, CA

#### *CURRENT AAPI WOMEN IN STATEWIDE ELECTED EXECUTIVE OFFICE:*

- Fiona Ma | CA Treasurer
- Betty Yee | CA State Controller
- Kimberly Yee | AZ Treasurer

#### *CURRENT AAPI WOMEN IN THE MA LEGISLATURE:*

- Sonia Chang-Diaz | Senate
- Maria Duaime Robinson | House
- Vanna Howard | House
- Tram T. Nguyen | House
- Erika Uyterhoeven | House

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> In this report: (1) The categorization of “AAPI women” is used in congruence with the dominant labels and current limitations of publicly available data, while recognizing the need for greater inclusion of nonbinary and gender non-conforming individuals in future data collection and reporting; (2) “AAPI” refers to those who identify as Asian American and/or Pacific Islander, and “Asian American” is generally used when referring to groups with origins or ancestry from specific regions of Asia, but not Pacific Island nations; (3) “Politics” or “political representation” generally refers to electoral politics and/or elected positions.
- <sup>2</sup> All statistics listed in this report represent publicly available data as of August 2021.
- <sup>3</sup> Data from this section is credited to: (1) State Library of Massachusetts Archives, *Asian American Legislators of the Massachusetts General Court: 2009-Present*, February 2017; (2) Massachusetts House Asian Caucus, *Caucus Members*, 2021; (3) Center for American Women and Politics, Eagleton Institute of Politics, Rutgers University, 2021. See [this page](#) and [this page](#) for updated women legislator data each year.
- <sup>4</sup> Center for American Women and Politics, Eagleton Institute of Politics, Rutgers University, 2021.
- <sup>5</sup> Members of the MA House Asian Caucus, *How Massachusetts Can Support AAPI Communities*, Boston Globe, May 2021.
- <sup>6</sup> Quotes are printed with the permission of Vanna Howard, Tram Nguyen, Lisa Wong, and Michelle Wu.
- <sup>7</sup> Data from this section is credited to: (1) Reflective Democracy Campaign, *Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) Political Leadership*, May 2021; (2) National AAPI Power Fund, New American Leaders Action Fund, Groundswell Action Fund; *Advancing AAPI Women Candidates*; August 2020.
- <sup>8</sup> Data from this section is credited to: Center for American Women and Politics, Eagleton Institute of Politics, Rutgers University, 2021. See [this page](#) for updated data.

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